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RITES AND CEREMONIES

In an age of confusion such as ours, the most extraordinary affirmations have become possible and are even commonly accepted, those who put them forward and those who hear them being affected by the same lack of discernment; the observer of the various manifestations of the contemporary mentality has to note, at every instant, so many things of this kind, in all orders and in all domains, that he ought in the end no longer to be astonished by anything. Yet, despite all this, it is very difficult to defend oneself against a certain feeling of astonishment when one sees alleged "spiritual instructors," whom some even believe to be invested with more or less exceptional "missions," take refuge behind their "horror of ceremonies" in order to reject indiscriminately all rites, of whatever nature they may be, and even to declare themselves resolutely hostile to them. This horror is, in itself, a perfectly admissible thing, even legitimate if one wishes, on the condition of allowing a large place to a question of individual preferences and of not wanting everyone necessarily to share it; in any case, for our part, we understand it without the slightest difficulty; but we would certainly never have suspected that certain rites could be assimilated to "ceremonies," nor that rites in general ought to be regarded as having in themselves such a character. It is there that the confusion lies, truly strange on the part of those who have some pretension, more or less avowed, to serve as "guides" to others in spiritual matters.

We have explained often enough the importance of rites, as we have already done many times, as indispensable "vehicles" of the "spiritual influences" without which there could be no question of the slightest effective contact with realities of a higher order, but only of vague aspirations and of idealism more or less ill-defined, and of speculation.

We shall not linger here over seeking what may be the obscure motive that leads to such an attitude; it is moreover understood that we take the word “ceremony” in the sense that it constantly has in current language, and which is sufficiently well known to everyone for there to be no need to insist upon it: it is, in sum, always a manifestation involving a more or less great external display, of pomp, whatever the circumstances that may provide the occasion for it. It is obvious that one may invoke this pretext on every occasion where it may arise, and that it does in fact arise very often.

It is equally evident—and we shall return to this later—that there also exists, alongside rites properly so called, a multitude of ceremonies that have a purely profane character, and therefore that are not rites at all; but it is none the less a manifest abuse to decorate with the name of rites things that are in reality only ceremonies, and which are often destined to supplant the true rites, which they naturally imitate only in an entirely exterior way, that is to say purely on the “ceremonial” side. The rite itself, of which the ceremony was in some way only a simple “envelope,” is then entirely nonexistent, since there cannot be any such thing as a profane rite, which would be a contradiction in terms; and one may wonder whether the conscious inspirers of these gross counterfeits are simply counting on general ignorance and incomprehension in order to have such a substitution accepted, or whether they themselves share it to a certain extent.

We shall not seek to resolve this last question, and we shall only recall, for those who might be astonished that it can be raised, that the intelligence of properly spiritual realities is rigorously closed to “counter-initiation”; but all that matters to us precisely is the very fact that there exist ceremonies without rites, just as there exist rites without ceremonies, which suffices to show to what extent it is erroneous to wish to establish between the two things any identification or assimilation whatsoever.

We have often said that, in a strictly traditional civilization, everything truly has a ritual character, including the very actions of ordinary life;

should one therefore suppose, on that account, that men must live there, so to speak, in a state of perpetual ceremony? This is literally unimaginable, and it suffices to formulate the question thus for its entire absurdity to appear immediately; one must even say rather that it is quite the contrary of such a supposition that is true, for, rites then being something entirely natural, and in no degree having the character of exception that they seem to present when the consciousness of tradition weakens and when the profane point of view comes into being and spreads in proportion to this weakening, any ceremonies whatsoever accompanying these rites, and in some way underlining this exceptional character, would assuredly have no reason to exist in such a case. If one goes back to the origins, the rite is nothing other than "that which is in conformity with order," according to the meaning of the Sanskrit term rita; it is therefore that which alone is truly "normal," whereas the ceremony, on the contrary, always and inevitably gives the impression of something more or less abnormal, outside the habitual and regular course of events that fill the rest of existence.

This impression, let us note in passing, could perhaps contribute in part to explaining the very singular manner in which modern Westerners, who scarcely know how to separate religion from ceremonies, regard it as something entirely isolated, which no longer has any real relation with the ensemble of other activities to which they devote their lives.

Every ceremony has an artificial, even conventional character, so to speak, because it is, in the final analysis, only the product of an entirely human elaboration; even if it is destined to accompany a rite, this character is opposed to that of the rite itself, which, on the contrary, essentially involves a "non-human" element. He who performs a rite, if he has attained a certain degree of effective knowledge, can and must even have the awareness that there is there something that surpasses him, that in no way depends on his individual initiative; but, as for ceremonies, if they may impress those who attend them, and who are thereby reduced to the role of simple spectators rather than "participants," it is quite clear that those who organize them and regulate their arrangement know perfectly well what to think of them

and realize fully that all the efficacy that one may expect from them is entirely subordinate to the arrangements made by themselves and to the manner, more or less satisfactory, in which they will be executed. In fact, this efficacy, precisely because there is there nothing but what is human, cannot be of a truly profound order, and is in sum purely "psychological"; this is why one may say that it is indeed a matter of impressing those present or of imposing upon them by all sorts of sensible means; and, in ordinary language itself, is not one of the greatest praises that one can bestow on a ceremony precisely to qualify it as "imposing," without moreover the true meaning of this epithet generally being well understood?

Let us remark further, in this connection, that those who want to recognize in rites only effects of a "psychological" order also confuse them thereby, perhaps without realizing it, with ceremonies, and this because they fail to recognize their "non-human" character, by virtue of which their real effects, insofar as they are rites properly so called and independently of all accessory circumstances, are on the contrary of an order totally different from that.

Now, one might ask this question: why thus adjoin ceremonies to rites, as if the "non-human" needed this human assistance, whereas it ought rather to remain as free as possible from such contingencies? The truth is that there is here quite simply a consequence of the necessity that imposes itself of taking account of the factual conditions that are those of terrestrial humanity, at least in such and such a period of its existence; it is a concession made to a certain state of spiritual decadence of the men who are called upon to participate in the rites; it is these men, and not the rites, who need the help of ceremonies. There can in no way be any question of reinforcing or intensifying the very effect of rites in their proper domain, but only of rendering them more accessible to the individuals to whom they are addressed, of preparing these latter for them as far as possible, by placing them in an appropriate emotional and mental state; that is all that ceremonies can do, and it must be acknowledged that they are far from being useless in this respect and that, for the generality of men, they in fact fulfill this role fairly well.

This is also why they truly have a reason for being only in the exoteric order, which addresses itself to all without distinction; if it is a matter of the esoteric or initiatic order, things are entirely different, since the latter must be reserved for an elite which, by the very definition of the term, does not need these entirely external "adjuncts," its "qualification" implying precisely that it is superior to the state of decadence which is that of the greatest number; thus the introduction of ceremonies into this order, if it nevertheless comes about at times, can only be explained by a certain degeneration of the initiatic organizations in which such a fact occurs.

What we have just said defines the legitimate role of ceremonies; but, alongside this, there is also abuse and danger: since what is purely exterior is also, by the very force of things, what is most immediately apparent, there is always reason to fear that the accidental may cause the essential to be lost from view, and that ceremonies may take on, in the eyes of those who witness them, much more importance than the rites, which they in some way conceal beneath an accumulation of accessory forms. It may even happen, which is still more serious, that this error is shared by those whose function it is to perform the rites as authorized representatives of a tradition, if they themselves are affected by this general spiritual decadence of which we have spoken; and there then results that, true comprehension having disappeared, everything is reduced, consciously at least, to an excessive and unreasonable "formalism," which will readily attach itself above all to maintaining the brilliance of ceremonies and to amplifying it beyond measure, holding almost negligible the rite which would be reduced to the essential, and which is nevertheless all that should truly count. This is, for a traditional form, a sort of degeneration that borders on "superstition" understood in its etymological sense, since respect for forms survives there to their comprehension, and thus the "letter" entirely stifles the "spirit"; "ceremonialism" is not the observance of ritual, it is rather the forgetting of its profound value and of its real significance, the more or less coarse materialization of the conceptions one forms of its nature and of its role, and, finally, the failure to recognize the "non-human" in favor of the human.

REMARKS ON MATHEMATICAL NOTATION

(continued)[1]

If we consider, as previously stated, the series of integers and that of their inverses, the former is indefinitely increasing and the latter indefinitely decreasing; we could say that, in this way, numbers tend on the one hand towards the indefinitely large and on the other towards the indefinitely small, meaning by this the very limits of the domain in which we consider these numbers, since a variable quantity can only tend towards a limit. The domain in question is, in short, that of the numerical quantity considered in all its possible extension; this amounts to saying that its limits are not determined by any particular number, however large or small we may suppose it to be, but solely by the very nature of the number as such. It is precisely because the number, like everything else of a determinate nature, excludes everything that is not itself, that there can be no question here of infinity. Moreover, we have just stated that the indefinitely large must necessarily be conceived as a limit, and it is worth noting in this regard that the expression "to tend towards infinity," used by mathematicians in the sense of "to grow indefinitely," is also an absurdity, since infinity obviously implies the absence of any limit, and consequently there would be nothing there toward which it is possible to tend. It goes without saying that the same observations would also apply to modes of quantity other than number, that is to say, to the different kinds of continuous quantity, particularly spatial and temporal; each of these, in its own order, is similarly susceptible to indefinite extension, but essentially limited by its very nature, as is quantity itself in all its generality; the mere fact that there are things to which quantity is not applicable suffices to establish that the supposed notion of "quantitative infinity" is contradictory.

On the other hand, since a domain is indefinite, we do not distinctly know its limits, and consequently, we cannot fix them precisely; therein

lies, in short, the whole difference with ordinary finiteness. A kind of indeterminacy therefore remains, but it is only indeterminacy from our point of view, and not in reality itself, since the limits nonetheless exist for that reason; whether we see them or not, it cannot change the nature of things. One could also say, with regard to number, that this apparent indeterminacy results from the fact that the sequence of numbers, as a whole, is not "terminated" by a certain number, as is always the case with any portion of this sequence that can be considered in isolation; Therefore, there is no number, however large, that can be identified with the indefinitely large in the sense we have just understood it, and, naturally, symmetrical considerations would also apply to the indefinitely small. However, one can at least consider a number practically indefinite, if one may put it that way, when it can no longer be stated in language or represented in writing, which, in fact, inevitably happens at some point when considering numbers that are always increasing or decreasing; this is, if you will, a simple question of "perspective," but this very thing agrees with the nature of the indefinite, which, ultimately, is nothing other than that whose limits can be, not eliminated—which is impossible because the finite can only produce the finite—but simply pushed back until they are entirely lost from sight.

In this regard, some rather curious questions arise: for example, one might wonder why the Chinese language symbolically represents the indefinite with the number ten thousand; the expression "the ten thousand things," for instance, signifies all beings, which are indeed indefinite in multitude. What is most remarkable is that precisely the same thing also occurs in Greek, where a single word, with a simple difference in accentuation that is obviously only a completely secondary detail, serves to express both ideas: μὺριοι, ten thousand; μυρίοι, an indefiniteness. The real reason for this is this: the number ten thousand is the fourth power of ten; Now, according to the formula of the Tao Te Ching, "one produced two, two produced three, three produced all numbers," which implies that four, immediately multiplied by three, is in a certain way equivalent to the entire set of numbers, and this is because, as soon as we have the quaternary, we also have, by adding the

first four numbers, the denarius, which represents a complete numerical cycle: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10; this is the Pythagorean Tetraktys, the meaning of which we may return to more specifically in another occasion. It can also be added that this representation of numerical indefiniteness has its counterpart in the spatial order: we know that raising to a higher power of one degree represents, in this order, the addition of a dimension; now, since our extension has only three dimensions, its limits are exceeded when we go beyond the third power, which, in other words, amounts to saying that raising to the fourth power marks the very end of its indefiniteness, since, as soon as it is achieved, we have thereby left this extension.

Whatever the case may be with these last considerations, the indefinitely large is in reality what mathematicians represent, as we have said, by the symbol ∞; if this symbol did not have this meaning, it would truly have no meaning at all. and, according to the foregoing, what is thus represented is not a determined number, but in a way a whole domain, which is moreover necessary in order for it to be possible to consider, according to what we have already indicated, inequalities and even different orders of magnitude in the indefinite. As for the indefinitely small, which can be regarded, in a similar way, as being everything which, in descending order, lies beyond the limits of our means of evaluation, and which, consequently, we are led to consider as practically non-existent in relation to us as a quantity, we can, without introducing here the differential or infinitesimal notation which, in fact, only has a reason for being for the study of continuous variations, represent it as a whole by the symbol 0, although this is, in truth, only one of the meanings of zero; And it must be clearly understood that this symbol, for the same reasons as that of the indefinitely large, does not represent a definite number either.

The series of numbers, as we have considered it to extend indefinitely, through the integers and their inverses, in both ascending and descending directions, therefore takes the following form:

0 … 1/4, 1/3, 1/2, 1, 2, 3, 4, … ∞;

Two numbers equidistant from the central unit are inverses or complements of each other, therefore, as we explained previously, reproduce the unit by their multiplication: $1/n \times n = 1$, so that, for the two ends of the series, we are led to write also: $0 \times \infty = 1$. However, because the signs 0 and ∞, which are the two factors of this last product, do not actually represent determinate numbers, it follows that the expression $0 \times \infty$ itself constitutes what is called an indeterminate form, and we must then write: $0 \times \infty = n$, n being any number; but, in any case, we are thus brought back to the ordinary finite, the two opposite indefinites neutralizing each other, so to speak. It is still very clear here that the symbol ∞ does not represent Infinity, because Infinity can have neither opposite nor complement, and it cannot be correlated with anything, neither with zero nor with unity or any other number; being the absolute All, it contains both Non-Being and Being, so that zero itself, insofar as it is not pure nothingness, must necessarily be considered as included within Infinity.

By alluding here to Non-Being, we touch upon another meaning of zero, different from the one we have just considered, and which is even the most important from the point of view of its metaphysical symbolism. But in this respect, to avoid any confusion between the symbol and what it represents, it is important to clarify that metaphysical Zero, which is Non-Being, is not zero of quantity, any more than metaphysical Unity, which is Being, is arithmetic unity; what is thus designated by these terms can only be so by analogical transposition, since, as soon as one places oneself within the Universal, one is obviously beyond any special domain such as that of quantity. Moreover, it is not insofar as it represents the indefinitely small that zero can be taken as the symbol of Non-Being, but insofar as, according to another of its mathematical meanings, it represents the absence of quantity, which indeed symbolizes in its order the possibility of non-manifestation, just as unity symbolizes the possibility of manifestation, being the starting point of the indefinite multiplicity of numbers as Being is the principle of all manifestation.

However one considers zero, it cannot in any case be pure nothingness: this is all too obvious when it comes to the indefinitely small; it is true that this is, if you will, only a derived meaning, due to a kind of approximate assimilation of a quantity negligible for us to the absence of all quantity; but, with regard to the very absence of quantity, what is zero in this respect may very well not be so in other respects, as can be clearly seen by an example such as that of the point, which is unextended, that is to say spatially zero, but which is nonetheless, as we have explained elsewhere, the very principle of all extension. It is indeed truly strange that mathematicians are accustomed to considering zero as pure nothingness, and yet find it impossible for them not to regard it at the same time as possessing an indefinite power, since, placed to the right of another so-called significant digit, it contributes to forming the representation of a number which, through the repetition of this same zero, can grow indefinitely, as is the case, for example, with the number ten and its successive powers. If zero were truly nothingness, this could not be the case, and it would then be nothing more than a useless sign, entirely devoid of any effective value. Thus, there is yet another inconsistency to add to all those we have already noted.

If we return to zero, considered as representing the indefinitely small, what is most important to remember is that its domain, in the doubly indefinite sequence of numbers, includes everything that is beyond our means of evaluation in a certain sense, just as the domain of the indefinitely large includes, in the same sequence, everything that is beyond these same means of evaluation in the other sense. This being the case, there is obviously no reason to speak of numbers less than zero, any more than of numbers greater than the infinite; and this is even more unacceptable, if possible, when zero represents purely and simply the absence of any quantity, because a quantity that would be less than nothing is truly inconceivable. However, this is what was intended, albeit in a slightly different sense than we indicated, by introducing the consideration of so-called negative numbers into mathematics, and forgetting that these numbers, originally, are nothing more than an indication of the result of a a truly impossible subtraction, by which a

larger number would have to be subtracted from a smaller number; but this consideration of negative numbers and the logically questionable consequences that it entails still require some further explanation.
(*to be continued*)